

Introduction to the Period
1860 - 1914

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Historical Background

Society from 1860 - 1914

- America experienced rapid industrial growth (factories, railroads, etc.) after the Civil War.
- The country grew as a second great expansion was made possible by transportation improvements.
- Society had to adjust to the change from agrarian (farming) way of life to urban (cities) problems, e.g. overcrowding

Society from 1860 – 1914 (cont)

- These changes led to advancements in technology, science, medicine, and civil issues.
- However, they also created new problems:
 - urban slums (overcrowded poor)
 - farm issues (farm consolidation, no profit)
 - labor unrest (workers demand better treatment/wages)

Society from 1860 – 1914 (cont)

- The country became one of the most diverse in the world (if not the most diverse):
 - Farmers (black or white)
 - Native Americans
 - Freed slaves (sharecroppers or factory workers)
 - Chinese and European immigrants
 - *If you were poor, life was hard.*

Society from 1860 – 1914 (cont)

- Freedom & literacy spread; towns industrialized and urbanized; population bases expanded due to immigration; middle class wealth & purchasing power rose.
- These markers provided a fertile literary environment for readers interested in understanding these rapid shifts in culture.

The Civil War in Literature

- This was a different kind of war, inglorious (as opposed to the American Revolution), but without the same social activism that would inspire writers in Vietnam.
- The better war novels about the Civil War did not emerge until well after the end of the conflict, because the form that was required to write it- *realism*- was still developing.
- The country experienced a serious shock to its idealism, as the war took a devastating toll, and then, the President was assassinated.

Lack of Firsthand Experience

- Many of the famous writers of the day did not take part in the Civil War, because they were too old.
- The future literary stars were either too young or were caught up in actual fighting (which didn't allow time for fiction writing).
- Important novels that reflected the experience of the war would not appear until the younger generation, who had fought firsthand, began to write.

Walt Whitman in the War

- Walt Whitman, the premier poet in the country, was too old to fight (and he was extremely pacifistic). However, he did work as nurse in hospitals, caring for wounded soldiers.
- Nonetheless, Whitman remained optimistic about the future of humanity, which is why he is not grouped with his contemporaries.

Herman Melville in the War

- One of the great Romantic writers, Herman Melville (author Moby Dick) was negatively affected by the war.
- He wrote poems about humanity's innate evil.
- His poems did show respect for soldiers on both sides of the conflict, because he believed the soldiers were heroic, though the war was pointless.

Rationalist Philosophy

- Scientific developments, an desire for historical fact, and the violence ongoing in the world led many to question the wisdom, power, and even the existence, of God.
- Focus on human experience, rather than the truths of mathematics and science that aren't related to human experience.
- Interested in people's quiet struggle with life's apparent meaninglessness and the use of diversion to escape boredom.
- Humans have free choice and such choices change who we are as people.
- Nietzsche's *Übermensch* ("overman", "superman") are examples of those who define the nature of their own existence.
- Great individuals invent their own values and create the very terms under which they excel.



Realism & Regionalism

Realism Emerges

- *Realism* as a form of writing emerged from the bleakness of the country after the Civil War.
- Gone were the romantic notions of chivalry and gentlemen—even the west was wild & dangerous, rather than romantic; its heroes were often possessed of questionable backgrounds and morals, rather than an admirable, transcendent spirit.
- For the first time in the country's history, writers were challenged to express the possibility that, perhaps, something *was* wrong with America, even with the human spirit; the war had dashed the illusion that America was magical or different from other countries.
- *Realist* writers tried to express basic desires & emotions in simple, common language; they avoided mystical or supernatural events (as compared to The Scarlet Letter).

Realism Defined & Explained

- the faithful representation of reality; verisimilitude
- also denotes that the story focuses on a particular subject matter, especially the representation of middle-class life
- Realism developed
- as a reaction against romanticism
- from an interest in scientific method & mankind's scientific progress
- along with the systematizing of the study of documentary history
- under the influence of rational philosophy

Realism vs. Romanticism

- "Where romanticists transcend the immediate to find the ideal, and naturalists plumb the actual to find the scientific laws that control its actions, realists center their attention on the immediate, the here and now, the specific action, and the verifiable consequence" (*A Handbook to Literature* 428).
- Realists sought to express the moment, not the divine meaning.
- Realists did not look for salvation in heaven (e.g. Reverend Dimmesdale), which could not be verified; instead, they looked at the consequence on earth, which was observable.

Realism Dominates

- Realism has been called a "strategy for imagining and managing the threats of social change".
- These significant changes (social, political, historical, emotional, industrial, commercial) all occurred in the same 30-year time frame *in a country that had experienced relatively little change for nearly 100 years.*
- The reading public looked for stories with characters who felt a sense of confusion with life, an uncertainty about the future, and doubt about traditional values & beliefs.

Characteristics of Realism

- Describes reality closely & in detail, with emphasis on accuracy & truth, even at the expense of plot.
- Character more important than action & plot; complex ethical choices are often the subject, are complex combination of attitude & motive; are a product of environment, their relationships, their social class, & their past.
- Class is important, especially the upwardly-mobile middle class.
- Events plausible, avoiding the dramatic, rare occurrences of naturalistic novels, or the mystical elements of Romanticism.
- Language is natural & realistic, not elegant or poetic; tone may be comic, satiric, or matter-of-fact.
- Author is objective, not present in the novel nor taking sides; authorial comments (or the narrator who was not present in the story) almost vanish (see The Scarlet Letter)
- Individual cannot save or redeem the world-at-large.

Offshoots of Realism

- Henry James began a new focus in writing- the *psychological* story, which took readers into the characters' inner lives.
- This new direction would heavily influence Faulkner and other modernist writers.
- The story is usually told from a very personal, very limited point-of-view; plot centered on mundane events that were important because of the character's specific desires & hopes (see *The Awakening*).
- The emphasis is on the character's thoughts & wants, not on the plot, and the entire story is told through the character's eyes (do not confuse this with meaning they were all first-person).



Regionalism (aka Southwestern Humor)

The Trickster

- An archetypal (“an original model of a person, object, or concept”) character.
- Traits: clever, deceptive, humorous, mischievous
- Tricksters in *Regionalism/Southwestern Humor* often played their jokes or pranks on unsuspecting newcomers, thus serving as a warning to travelers to beware of new places & people.
- Twain’s *The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County* is the story of a trickster.

Regionalism Emerges

- Regionalist writers sought to describe specific areas with which they had significant experience.
- However, many of these writers were often unrealistic in depicting character and social environment (situations were too dramatic, characters were larger-than-life, etc).
- Like southwestern fiction, regionalist writers did not seek to write “classics”; their stories were “tall tales” that were more entertaining than thoughtful.
- Regionalist writers were more concerned with capturing the voice, tone, style, and sensibility of their region, rather than developing character, conflict, or theme.

Regionalism as a Form

- Regionalists were among the first to experiment heavily with the appearance of words on the page.
- In “The Celebrated Jumping Frog...”, Twain captured how the words *sounded*, rather than focus on how they were actually spelled.
- This experimentation would find full expression with the modernists, after 1914.
- Regionalism has also been called *Local Color*.

Characteristics of Regionalism

- Arose from tall tales of frontier heroes (e.g. Davy Crockett).
- Characters include a braggart whose mishaps are larger than life and whose solutions are ingenious.
- Use of dialect, earthy language and incidents, crude physical humor, and cruelty.
- Conflicts with nature described in a humorous way.
- The land and its creatures are larger than life, mythical.
- Triumphant trickster, or the trickster who is himself tricked or bested in a trade.
- Trickster is played off against a character representing an educated elite.
- Provided subtle reminder to the eastern, educated city-dweller: beware of nature & new places.

Naturalism

Naturalism Emerges

- Reaction to the Romantic belief that truth was in the human soul or spirit; Naturalism attempted to apply scientific principles of objectivity and detachment to its study of human beings.
- Different from Realism in that characters can be studied through their relationships to their surroundings, because humans are just animals. Naturalism is also more of a way of seeing the world, rather than a way of writing (as Realism is).
- The skeptical climate in their society led Naturalistic writers to believe that the laws that govern human lives could be studied and understood.
- Like Realist writers, Naturalists created characters with little sense of individuality (contrast to Hester Prynne).

Characteristics of Naturalism

- Characters are frequently uneducated or lower-class whose lives are governed by heredity, instinct, and passion.
- Characters cannot use free will because of forces beyond their control.
- Fate is not divine, but a result of explainable forces, such as social class, relationships with others, attitude, & human ego (see *To Build a Fire*)
- Focused, dramatic scenes are usually filled with violence.
- Behavior is determined by biology (genetics) & environment (how we are raised).
- Life is a grim, losing battle (humans cannot beat nature or “rise above the human condition”, as romantics sought to do).

Offshoots of Naturalism

- *Ironists* were similar to *naturalists*, because their works were concerned with the indifference of the universe (also, as their name implies, their stories often had ironic twists)
- Ironists did not set their stories in nature, but usually in more “civilized” settings (see *The Story of an Hour*).
- The ironic twist often led to the character’s death (see *The Story of an Hour*) or to the degeneration of the character’s quality of life (see *The Necklace*).
- Stories were sometimes shorter than other short stories of the day.

Examples

- Regionalism- “The Notorious Jumping Frog of Calaveras County” (Mark Twain)
- Realism- “A Mystery of Heroism” (Stephen Crane)
- Naturalism- “To Build a Fire” (Jack London)
- Ironism- “A Pair of Silk Stockings” (Kate Chopin)